



BUILDING ON  
COMMON GROUND:  
Balancing Debate with  
Dialogue in Congress

107th Congress Stennis  
Congressional Staff Fellows

# Executive Summary

The 107<sup>th</sup> Congress Stennis Congressional Staff Fellows identified three broad areas of inquiry—dialogue, common language and understanding, institutional structure and partisanship, and citizen engagement—as part of their learning experience under the core question of **“How can we better balance debate with dialogue, both within Congress and within our society?”** Stennis Fellows from diverse backgrounds, positions, and political perspectives discovered remarkable agreement on concerns related to the future of Congress. They found that, despite the unique circumstances they faced after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on America and the disruption of Congressional offices after the release of anthrax spores within the Capitol complex, Fellows shared a commitment to Congress as an institution of American democracy.

Both debate and advocacy are essential to the governing process. An underlying shared framework of trust and understanding built and renewed through dialogue is also essential to effective governance. Debate enables conflicting views to be articulated more fully, throws into sharper focus the strengths and weaknesses of different positions, and enables clearer judgments to be made. Dialogue, on the other hand, is essential when people with different beliefs, perspectives, backgrounds, interests, values, or traditions must find common ground. Dialogue creates the shared language and framework, the mutual trust and understanding that enables subsequent debate, negotiation and decision-making to be more productive and effective.

Current trends in society and Congress make the balancing of debate with dialogue more difficult, yet more important. Less time for reflection, increasing social fragmentation, and increasing political conflict are major obstacles to true dialogue. A brighter future, however, can be achieved through coordinated efforts such as the Stennis Fellowship in which roughly equal numbers of staff from both parties and both chambers have been able to work together effectively and have discovered much common ground. Building on that common ground, Stennis Fellows in the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress defined a number of steps that Fellows and others can take. These practical steps, characterized by greater trust and civility, better debate and dialogue, fuller citizen participation and less partisan gridlock, are further explained in the report:

- Developing more opportunities for Members of Congress and Congressional staff to dialogue and get to know each other before the debate is engaged
- Establishing a special award—the Stennis Cup—to be given in each Congress to the Members who have done the most to advance the quality of debate and dialogue
- Developing mentoring programs both for Members and for staff
- Encouraging joint, bipartisan appearances by Members in each other's districts
- Increasing dialogue within each Congressional office between press staff and policy staff
- Providing fuller, more substantive briefings to the press
- Doing a better job of educating the public and finding more effective ways of listening to the public—not confusing the findings of polls or the advocacy of special interests with the voice of the public

Stennis Fellows in the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress have identified much common ground on which to build. In microcosm, their proceedings became an example of how to better balance debate with dialogue, both within Congress and across society.

Stennis Fellows found encouragement in the discovery of a common bond of respect and affection for the institution, and that the bond is shared with many others within Congress, in academia, in the media, and among the citizenry who can help carry these ideas forward.

# Building on Common Ground: Balancing Debate with Dialogue in Congress

The 107th Congress Stennis Congressional Staff Fellows identified three broad areas of inquiry as we embarked upon a learning adventure focused on the future of Congress as an institution of American democracy. Under the core question of “How can we better balance debate with dialogue, both within Congress and within our society?”, Stennis Fellows selected *Dialogue, Common Language and Understanding*; *Institutional Structure and Partisanship—Personality, Politics and Policy*; and *Citizen Engagement* as the focus for roundtable discussions with outside experts. Stennis Fellows from diverse backgrounds, positions, and political perspectives soon discovered remarkable agreement on concerns related to the legislative branch of the federal government. The common commitment of Stennis Fellows to the institutions of the House and Senate, where we have labored for a significant portion of our careers and risen to positions of leadership, formed a foundation for a unified pursuit of ideas to strengthen the capacity of Congress to successfully respond to challenges ahead.

The 107th Congress Stennis Fellows faced unique circumstances during our period of Fellowship. The terrorist attacks on September 11th and the anthrax crisis, which shut down parts of Capitol Hill for an extended period, created exceptional challenges for Congress and its staff, and unprecedented complications for the Fellows program. Through all of this, Stennis Fellows continued to work together to make the program a success in a way that was both remarkable and reassuring.

A list of the sessions, and of the outside experts with whom we met, is included in Annex I.

## Balancing Debate with Dialogue

Both debate and advocacy are essential to the governing process. An underlying shared framework of trust and understanding built and renewed through dialogue is also essential to effective governance.

The terms “debate” and “dialogue” are used in many different ways. Thus it is essential to clarify what those terms mean, how they differ, and when each is appropriate. Debate enables conflicting views to be articulated more fully, throws into sharper focus the strengths and weaknesses of different positions, and enables clearer judgments to be made. As such, debate is central to the role of Congress in our democracy. Dialogue, on the other hand, is essential when people with different beliefs, perspectives, backgrounds, interests, values, or traditions must find common ground. The need to find common ground is becoming more common and more critical in our increasingly diverse and fragmented society.

Advocacy/Debate	Dialogue
Assuming that there is one right answer (and you have it)	Assuming that others have pieces of the answer
<b>Combative: attempting to prove the other side wrong</b>	<b>Collaborative: attempting to find common understanding</b>
About winning	About finding common ground
<b>Listening to find flaws and make counter-arguments</b>	<b>Listening to understand and find a basis for agreement</b>
Defending your assumptions	Bringing up your assumptions for inspection and discussion
<b>Criticizing the other side's point of view</b>	<b>Re-examining all points of view</b>
Defending one's views against others	Admitting that others' thinking can improve one's own
<b>Searching for weaknesses and flaws in the other position</b>	<b>Searching for strengths and value in the other position</b>
Seeking an outcome that agrees with your position	Discovering new possibilities and opportunities

This chart and the discussion of how dialogue differs from debate, negotiation and decision-making is drawn from the Essentials of Dialogue workshop provided by Viewpoint Learning Inc.

The key to effective debate and dialogue is to get the sequence right: dialogue must precede debate. Dialogue creates the shared language and framework, the mutual trust and understanding, that enables subsequent debate, negotiation, and decision-making to be more productive and effective. Dialogue creates the common ground on which we can build better debate and better decision-making. While we have many mechanisms and practices in Congress and in society that lead to debate and decision-making, we too often neglect the prior dialogue on which more productive debate and decision-making depend.

### ***Key trends affecting the balance between debate and dialogue***

Moreover, there are trends in society and Congress making the balancing of debate with dialogue more difficult, yet more important. These include:

Less time for reflection, driven, in part, by:

- 24-hour news cycle demanding instant response
- Growing volume of voices and interests that must be addressed
- Continuous fundraising cycle

Increasing social fragmentation, for example:

- Growing segmentation of society, multiplying special interests
- Ethnic and social differences
- Conflicts between religious and secular values
- Less interaction across differences (balkanization)
- Gap between haves and have nots
- Technology divide

More political conflict:

- Continuous election cycle, where campaigning impacts legislating
- Media that focus on and reward conflict
- Negative campaigning
- Public apathy and mistrust of government, institution bashing
- Narrow majorities in both Houses
- Special interests and spin doctors fuel debate
- Growing partisanship—fewer Members “in the middle”
- Increasing turnover of Members and staff—less institutional memory

If we project these trends forward, the future is not one most would desire.

### ***Reason for hope***

But the future can be much brighter if we can work together in different ways. And there is good reason to believe that we can. The Stennis Fellowship itself provides a small example, in which roughly equal numbers of staff from both parties and both chambers have been able to work together effectively and have discovered much common ground. Once we recognize that we agree on perhaps 80 percent, dealing with the remaining 20 percent is much easier. That is the benefit of balancing debate with dialogue. Dialogue brings the 80 percent into the foreground, increasing mutual trust and understanding, making debate on the remaining 20 percent more civil and more productive.

Perhaps the greatest reason for hope lies in the Members of Congress and Congressional staff themselves who, for the most part, are devoted to the institution, to representing the interests of constituents, and to protecting and supporting the American people. That purpose is the most important common ground we share, and it was evident from the earliest days of the Stennis Fellowship. Building on that common ground, Fellows defined the future we would like to see, and concrete steps we and others could take to realize that future.

## **Building on Common Ground**

Senator Stennis had the motto, “Look Ahead”, inscribed on a plaque on his desk. It has become a motto both for the Stennis Center and for the Fellows program. As the Fellows began to “Look Ahead” to define the kind of future we would like to see, we found much common ground that transcend the boundaries of party and chamber.

### ***Shared vision of a desired future characterized by:***

- Greater dialogue, civility and comity both in Congress and in society, based on trying to understand, respect and acknowledge different points of view, and avoid personal attacks
- Within Congress, more opportunities for dialogue among Members and also among staff before debate is engaged; more opportunities to build personal relationships, mutual trust and understanding, and to work together without seeking political advantage
- Increased recognition for Members and others who improve the quality of both debate and dialogue, and for the “workhorses”—those who get the job done without seeking the limelight
- Greater separation between campaigning and governing, along with less negative campaigning and institution bashing and an end to the money chase
- Honest partisanship that does not distort issues, coupled with greater rewards (and fewer penalties) for bipartisanship, and party leaders who focus more on leadership and less on party
- More meaningful hearings, roundtables and substantive debate that focus on real issues (rather than “gotcha” issues), that pursue longer term questions and solutions, and that provide more opportunities for Members and staff to learn
- Greater citizen participation in governance and in civic activities, a more educated and informed public and increased trust in government
- More sophisticated and complete media coverage, fewer celebrity-focused issues, and more policy-oriented news coverage; and media that play a more responsible and effective role in informing and educating the public
- A greater capacity in Congress and society to take a wider view, not just what is good for me or my locality, but also what is good for the country and for the world

Moving toward this kind of future will require steps that:

- Rebuild trust and civility;
- Foster better debate and dialogue;
- Promote full citizen participation; and
- Re-empower Congress to overcome partisan gridlock

### ***Taking steps forward***

The Fellows identified a number of practical steps that we and others can take to advance these four goals:

1. More opportunities for Members and staff to dialogue and get to know each other before the debate is engaged. Examples of how this has been done, at least to some degree, across party, chamber, and other boundaries include:
  - Non-denominational prayer groups
  - Bipartisan retreats
  - Member and staff trips (there needs to be an agreement that campaigns will not use these to score political points, and there should be press availability immediately afterwards to discuss the purpose and lessons learned on each trip)
  - Working together across party lines on civic projects (e.g. Habitat for Humanity), along with golf tournaments, baseball games, and similar events in which Members participate, usually for a charitable cause
  - Encouraging movement of Congressional staff between House and Senate, and possibly also enabling Congressional staff to spend periods working in State and local government, the private sector, or voluntary sector
  - Other informal relationship-building activities, such as dining regularly with individuals from another party or chamber
  - Programs like the Stennis Fellowship

The support and encouragement of the leadership of both parties in both chambers will be essential if such opportunities for dialogue are to be expanded and new opportunities developed. Leaders can encourage and support such activities, but equally important, they can reduce some of the scheduling and time constraints that too often stand in the way. Members’ spouses also can play a critical role by sponsoring events designed to foster dialogue across the boundaries of party and chamber.

2. To recognize and encourage better debate and dialogue, a special award—the Stennis Cup—should be established and given each year or each Congress to the Members who have done the most to advance the quality of debate and dialogue. Nominations would be made by Congressional staff and vetted by a panel of Senior Stennis Fellows. A distinguished panel of former Members would make the final selection. The award might be given each year to two Members in each chamber, one from each party.

3. To build long-term commitment to the institution and institutional memory mentoring programs should be developed both for Members and for staff. Senior Stennis Fellows have initiated a mentoring program for Congressional staff that should be extended. The Stennis Center also might work with the Association of Former Members of Congress to define different possibilities for developing a mentoring program for Members. One good first step might be to sponsor a dinner for former and new Members where initial connections could be established.
4. Joint bipartisan appearances by Members in each other's districts, in particular when organized around important issues, can foster better dialogue and debate and should be encouraged. Leaders of both parties in both chambers can encourage Members to take such initiatives and set an example.
5. More dialogue is needed within each Congressional office between press staff and policy staff. Better understanding and communications between press officers and policy staff in each office can help improve relations and understanding between the press and Congress. Each of us can take this initiative within our offices, and we encourage other staff to do the same.
6. Educating the media—and ultimately the public—through better briefings to the press is critical. This might include providing more off-the-record, substantive background briefings to the press. Again, this is a step that each Fellow can take. The Stennis Center and The Freedom Forum also could work together to improve the level of dialogue and understanding between Congress and the press, and might offer an orientation program to journalists new to the Hill before they receive their credentials.
7. A better job must be done of informing and educating the public about the positive role of government and the Congress. Steps that can be taken include:
  - Making more effective use of House and Senate web pages
  - Encouraging educational foundations to develop video games designed to inform and interest people in the process of governing
  - Creating public service announcements and newspaper inserts
  - Providing civics teachers with scholarships that enable them to work with Congress and develop first-hand experience of the process
  - Utilizing the new Capitol Visitors Center to provide interactive education to visitors
  - Developing a speaker's bureau of former Members of Congress, Stennis Fellows, and other Congressional staff to bring their perspective on how government works to associations, professional groups, students, and more

One basic insight related to dialogue is that the best way to encourage people to listen to you is to listen to them. More effective ways of listening to the public must be found, and we must not confuse the findings of polls or the advocacy of special interests with the voice of the public. This must be a priority for Congress and its staff if we want to develop a more effective public dialogue.

## Conclusions

Stennis Fellows were not attempting to be comprehensive in identifying steps to better balance debate and dialogue, but rather to focus on steps we believe we can take or encourage others to take. Stennis Fellows went on to develop detailed action plans, defining who would do what and by when to move each of these steps forward.

While we believe the steps outlined previously can help move us toward the vision of a desired future shared by the Stennis Fellows, these steps alone are insufficient to bridge the gap between the desired future and the road we are on now. To make a difference, we need to start from where we are, and we each can make a contribution from any starting point. All who share the vision of the desired future defined by the Stennis Fellows are invited to consider what you can do to contribute to its realization, starting from where you are. For example, partisan gridlock can lead to ossification of the institution unless innovative ways are found to enable Members to vote their conscience more often and to act more independently. Former Members of Congress, interested sitting Members, academics, the media, and Congressional staff all can make important contributions to overcoming internal inertia and citizen indifference, and to devising and recommending needed reforms in rules, procedures and organization. We invite each group and each individual to consider what they can do, starting from where they are.

Stennis Fellows in the 107th Congress have come together across party and chamber lines and have found much common ground on which to build. In microcosm, our proceedings became an example of how we can better balance debate with dialogue, both within Congress and across society.

Stennis Fellows found that what we have in common, and in particular our shared devotion to the institution, far outweighs our differences. During meetings of the Stennis Fellows, it was seldom possible to tell from the discussion who was a Republican and who was a Democrat, who was from the House and who was from the Senate. Stennis Fellows found that we are not alone in our concerns, and that there is tremendous value in stepping out of our normal roles, sharing experiences, developing new relationships, and learning from each other. We developed essential skills of dialogue and of listening, and many of us gained a new vision of Congress and of our own role within it, and felt re-energized. The overarching bond between the 107th Congress Stennis Fellows is an unwavering commitment to Congress as an institution of American democracy. In the words of one, “Congress is so important—the House and Senate are so important—that . . . it can’t be left in the hands of people who don’t care for the institution deeply.” Stennis Fellows found encouragement in the discovery that we all care for the institution deeply, and that the common ground we discovered within the Fellowship is also shared with many others who can help carry these ideas forward.

## **Annex I - Meetings of the 107<sup>th</sup> Congressional Staff Fellows Program**

1. Fellows met first in July 2001 to get acquainted and to define their learning agenda.
2. To set the stage for exploring their Learning Agenda, Fellows participated in a November workshop on “Dialogue Essentials” led by Steven Rosell and Mark Gerzon from Viewpoint Learning. The workshop gave Fellows a better appreciation of the differences between debate and dialogue and the appropriate times to use each.
3. The Fellows pursued their learning agenda in three roundtables with outstanding resource persons:

### *Dialogue, Common Language and Understanding (January 2002)*

- Dr. Deborah Tannen, best selling author and Professor of Linguistics at Georgetown University
- Shelby Coffey III, former President of CNN Business News and CNNfn as well as former Editor of the *Los Angeles Times*

### *Institutional Structure and Partisanship in Congress—Personality, Politics and Policy (March, 2002)*

- Dr. James Thurber, Director of the Center for Congressional Studies at American University
- Helen Dewar, *The Washington Post*

### *Citizen Engagement (March, 2002)*

- Daniel Yankelovich, one of the nation’s leading public opinion experts and author of *The Magic of Dialogue*
- Former Senator Warren Rudman

4. A small group of Fellows participated in the homecoming of the U.S.S. JOHN C. STENNIS in May.
5. Fellows worked together first in small groups in May and then at a two-day retreat in June and a subsequent half-day session at The Freedom Forum in July to synthesize what they had learned and to produce this report.

# 107th Congress Stennis Fellows

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